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Katherine J. Bingham
Brigham Young University - Provo

Elizabeth A. Cutrer-Párraga
Brigham Young University - Provo

Timothy B. Smith
Brigham Young University, tbs@byu.edu

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Ethnic-Racial Socialization Experiences of Mexican American Youth

Katherine J. Bingham, Elizabeth A. Cutrer-Párraga, & Timothy B. Smith

Department of Counseling Psychology & Special Education

Brigham Young University

Please direct correspondence concerning this manuscript to Timothy B. Smith; Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, USA; email: tbs@byu.edu

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Ethnic-Racial Socialization Experiences of Mexican American Youth

Abstract

Research has shown that ethnic-racial socialization (ERS) predicts education and mental health outcomes for adolescents. However, limited research has evaluated the ERS experiences of Latinx students. The current study examined ERS experiences of Mexican American youth in four focus group interviews that were transcribed and analyzed at both the individual and group level using interpretive phenomenological analysis. Main themes included feeling like an outsider, navigating discrimination, encountering social/emotional difficulties, and achieving a positive identity. Each theme contained 2-3 subcategories that provide further insight into the Mexican Americans' ERS experiences. Participants reported within-group discrimination, motivation to disprove stereotypes, and infrequent understanding or compassion from adults. Teachers, administrators, counselors, and school psychologists can attend to and seek to promote social connections, implement social-emotional learning interventions, foster resilience, work to dismantle racism, collaborate with parents, and create communities of inclusion.

Keywords: Latinx youth, cultural identity, racism, school psychology, identity development

In the United States, 28% of K-12 students are Latinx, an increase from 22% in 2009 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), with the majority identifying as Mexican American (61%; Office of Minority Education, 2021). Previous research indicates that Mexican American K-12 students encounter a lack of positive messages about the strengths of their cultural background (Fuller & García Coll, 2010) and experience negative stereotypes that devalue their academic potential (Balagna et al., 2013; Jensen, 2021; Livas Stein et al., 2013), such as teachers labeling students as uncaring/apathetic rather than recognizing their restricted opportunities and legitimate frustrations (Valenzuela, 2010). Given the impact that ethnic-racial messages have on student behaviors and outcomes, school professionals benefit from being aware of ethnic-racial socialization (ERS), the developmental process by which children identify with and exhibit cultural values and behaviors. This research evaluated Mexican Americans' experiences with ERS to inform professionals promoting their success in the schools.

Identity Development and Ethnic-Racial Socialization

Identity development characterizes adolescence and the transition to adulthood (Erikson, 1963). Exposure to different ideas, values, and cultures enables the sorting of personal beliefs and experiences, with corresponding interactions with self-perception (Leary & Tangney, 2011). Since racial-ethnic differences in North American society have multiple consequences, ethnic identity development merits attention (e.g., Huguley et al., 2019). Among youth who are Black, Indigenous, or other People of Color (BIPOC), strong ethnic identity is mildly associated with positive outcomes (correlated 0.17 across 184 studies; Smith & Silva, 2011). Families and schools can foster this aspect of youth development through ERS (e.g., Hughes et al., 2006; Saleem & Byrd, 2021).

School professionals can facilitate ERS messages (e.g., Saleem et al., 2022) and support families and parents in explaining how youth can respond to ethnic-racial differences and biases (Hughes et al., 2006). Prior research has identified three primary ERS messages: cultural socialization, preparation for bias, and promotion of mistrust (e.g., Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020).

Cultural socialization messages teach the value and unique practices of the family's heritage and traditions (Wang, Henry, et al., 2020). This positive affirmation of cultural heritage has been shown to result in multiple benefits, with a meta-analysis concluding that messages of cultural socialization consistently predict positive academic and mental health outcomes (Wang, Smith, et al., 2020). Cultural socialization messages are a positive protective factor for BIPOC youth as they navigate the complexity of identity development.

Preparation for bias, a second type of ERS message, encompasses parents' efforts to teach their children about racial prejudice and prepare them for discrimination (Hrapczynski & Leslie, 2019). The overall aim of the messages is to help the child understand that racial interactions reflect broad social contexts rather than their personal character, but the messages vary substantially (e.g., "Society teaches people to be racist;" "Some people are going to be mean to you, but that is because of what they believe, not who you are as an individual"). Outcomes of preparation for bias messages have been more mixed than those of cultural socialization, with some studies reporting positive effects, others negative, and still others mixed or null effects (Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). Preparation for bias messages may have mixed outcomes because they can vary on a continuum, varying from affirming to bleak or discouraging, with an optimal balance being healthy suspicion (White, 1984).

Promotion of mistrust, the third type of ERS message, convey not merely warnings but an overt lack of confidence in other ethnic-racial groups as well as institutions and law enforcement

(Cross et al., 2020). Of the three aspects of ERS, promotion of mistrust is the least studied; however, the most common finding is that such messages negatively impact youth in multiple ways (Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). In a review of the literature, promotion of mistrust messages were related to difficulties with internalizing behaviors (e.g., depression, anxiety) as well as a higher usage of avoidance-based coping skills (Wang, Henry, et al., 2020). Although possibly contributing to negative child outcomes, parents conveying promotion of mistrust messages typically intend to protect children from racism through in-group cohesion and differentiation from other groups.

Trends in Ethnic-Racial Socialization Research

The majority of ERS research has focused on African Americans, with many measures developed specific to their experiences and culture. The study of ERS among other racial groups is gaining in momentum but still lags the groundbreaking work with African Americans. In a meta-analysis, ERS messages were correlated with academic outcomes only among African Americans (Wang, Smith, et al., 2020). The authors suggested that this surprising finding was due to the small sample sizes of the other populations, but it is also possible that ERS has different impacts across other populations. Whereas African American parents tend to focus on preparation for bias, Latinx parents typically emphasize cultural socialization messages (Davidson, 2017). Such differences suggest that ethnicity-specific studies are needed.

As Mexican Americans make up a significant part of the U.S. population and public schools (Office of Minority Education, 2021), their processes of ERS warrant further study and attention. Since some individuals speak Spanish better than English, it is possible that they have been passed over for research due to the potential difficulty of a language barrier in collecting data (Case & Smith, 2000). This study sought to gather experiences of Mexican American

students via qualitative focus groups so their voices could be heard, informing school professionals (Rivas-Drake & Umaña-Taylor, 2019; Shriberg, et al., 2013).

Ethnic-Racial Socialization in Mexican American Families

The three main types of ERS messages described previously are conveyed in Mexican American families. However, the specific messages shared and the experiences of students in high school vary from family to family.

Cultural Socialization. A research study of Mexican American children identified several cultural messages delivered by parents to children (Bridges et al., 2012). Overall, children are raised to be *bien educados*, a concept that encompasses expectations for proper behavior. Parents often expect the children to communicate clearly and respectfully, whether in Spanish or English, as the situation may require. Respect is expected not only in conversation but also in how others are treated, especially in the presence of elders or those in positions of authority, including teachers. Across social situations, children are raised to behave with *comportamiento*, to have good manners and know their role in social situations.

Preparation for Bias. Among Mexican Americans, preparation for bias messages include accent bias that children may face as they speak English. Several research studies confirm negative perceptions and biases against Spanish-accented speech (e.g., Aguilar, 2018). This may also be found in schools as teachers may demonstrate bias against students whose English is influenced by their Spanish (Chin, 2010). Parents may experience accent or cultural biases in public settings (Hagelskamp & Hughes, 2014), which leads them to prepare their children for similar discrimination in school settings.

Promotion of Mistrust. Mexican American parents who are undocumented often share promotion of mistrust messages with their children (Cross et al., 2020). Fostering a sense of

mistrust toward the police is logical for parents who may live in fear of discovery and deportation by “La Migra” (slang for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, which oversees identification and removal of undocumented immigrants). Living in fear of detention or worse (Rueda, 2007) can impact the messages that parents share about what it means to be Mexican American.

Statement of the Problem

Although scholars have identified distinct aspects of ERS, limited scholarship has addressed how these distinct approaches interact in real-world settings, including for school professionals working with diverse students. The vast majority of prior scholarship has focused on the experiences of African American families and youth (e.g., Priest et al., 2014). Although African Americans have been at the forefront of the Civil Rights movement and continuing U.S. sociopolitical tensions, other people of color also experience and negotiate racism. The largest ethnic group in the U.S. is Latinx Americans (United States Census Bureau, 2020), and they can experience double bias if they are English language learners or speak with an accent (e.g., Aguilar, 2018). However, limited research has examined the ERS experiences of Latinx youth, particularly Mexican Americans, the largest ethnicity represented in Latinx populations across the U.S. This study sought to give voice to their high school experiences.

Method

Theoretical Framework

ERS theory provided the primary analytical lens for this study as one way to understand constructs that contribute to the socialization of Mexican Americans in their high school years. The researchers intentionally explored the ERS facets of cultural socialization, preparation for bias, and promotion of mistrust in the development of research questions, focus group protocols,

and coding procedures to evaluate Mexican American experiences and perspectives.

Research Design

Although prior ERS studies have often utilized quantitative methods, we selected the qualitative method of focus groups, which enabled participants to convey their experiences in their own words. Focus groups with Mexican American late adolescents and young adults allowed participants to share experiences among peers, with both individual responses and group-level data being analyzed. Our research question was: How do Mexican American late adolescents and young adults perceive ERS messages, and how did those ERS messages influence their experiences at school?

The data from this study were reviewed and analyzed from the perspective of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) which seeks to understand how individuals make meaning of experiences in their lives (Alase, 2017). No formal hypotheses were formulated in this study, as IPA avoids prior assumptions and does not test hypotheses (Reid et al., 2005). This paradigm places the participant in the role of expert as they share their experiences with the researcher. The perspectives and presence of the researcher in the conversation and analysis leads to a double hermeneutic: the researcher is making meaning of the participants making meaning of their experiences, with care to represent each individual's voice in the group (Lamb & Cogan, 2016). Therefore, the researchers carried out analysis at both the group and individual level.

There are several benefits to conducting focus groups, especially with populations that might feel cautious when alone with an unfamiliar interviewer. IPA focus groups are particularly effective for vulnerable populations asked to share sensitive experiences, including racial discrimination and family situations (Love et al., 2020). During focus groups, a participant may mention an issue that others agree with but may not have thought to mention on their own.

Participants

Because the main goal of IPA is to explore how study participants make sense of study phenomena from the participants' point of view, IPA tends to be used with homogenous samples (Alase, 2017). The current study sought to understand how Mexican American youth perceive ERS messages and how those messages influence their experiences at school. Participants were Mexican Americans who attended or had recently completed high school and were now university undergraduate students. There were 12 total participants in four focus groups, with one group of high school students conducted in a public library and three groups with university students conducted at the university's student center. Participants were born in the U.S., with at least one parent and one or more grandparents born in Mexico. Family documentation status was not collected, as that was considered highly sensitive information, but the participants reported predominantly (69%) speaking Spanish in the home and claimed both English and Spanish as native languages. In terms of age and gender, the first group of one female and one male high school students averaged 17 years old, and the three groups of university students averaged between 21 and 22 years old, with two females and one male in group two, three females in group three, and three females and one male in group four. Other demographic information was not collected.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, all study materials and procedures were approved by our university institutional review board. Using convenience sampling, our research team recruited participants from student clubs (Latinos in Action and Hispanos Unidos) at a large Western university and a high school in the same county by posting solicitations on club social media accounts. Informed consent and assent documents were provided in Spanish and English. At the

conclusion of each focus group, participants filled out a brief demographic information sheet and received a \$25 Amazon eGift Card.

All focus groups were conducted in English by a Mexican American female facilitator not involved in other aspects of the project and a European American female researcher who is fluent in Spanish and who also conducted initial data analyses. Although participants were given the option of speaking Spanish, they responded to all questions in English. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed using Zoom meetings, with transcripts edited for accuracy. To maintain confidentiality, identifying information was redacted from transcripts, and recordings were deleted upon completion of the data analyses.

Transcript data were all in English and were analyzed using IPA to identify themes from each individual and group. To obtain feedback from focus group members about our data interpretations in a step known as member checking, we emailed all participants a description of our themes, with a request for their review and editing. We were particularly interested in receiving additional information relevant to “Promotion of Mistrust,” so we included two follow-up questions on that topic. However, we received no replies to our solicitations.

Focus Group Schedule

We created a focus group interview schedule for IPA research (see the supplemental Appendix) that is comparable to creating an individual interview protocol. Questions were derived from pertinent literature in the field, ensuring a foundation in established research whereon participants could layer their lived experiences. To mitigate inherent biases in the wording and structure of the protocol, a researcher with extensive experience in qualitative methodologies scrutinized and edited the interview protocol. Subsequently, the researchers engaged in an interview rehearsal involving college student volunteers acting as if they were

study participants. The expert review and the interview rehearsal resulted in changes to the protocol to improve its effectiveness in capturing authentic participant experiences. Feedback from interview rehearsal also proved critical for improving the quality of actual interviews, particularly in terms of rapport building. The rehearsal enabled the interviewers to better support actual study participants to feel at ease and open up about emotional topics, a key aspect of research interviews (Alase, 2017).

After interviewers established rapport in the focus groups, they introduced broad topics for discussion, along with a card sort activity designed to encourage sharing. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were followed by prompts and probes to encourage elaboration.

Card Sort

To encourage all participants to contribute to the discussion, a card sort procedure was implemented (e.g., Love et al., 2020). Questions for participants were accompanied by several different potential responses based on the literature. There were also blank and “my opinion” cards to allow participants to express their personal perspectives. Participants were presented with all the options and requested to order them based on their own experiences. The way participants ordered the cards was neither recorded nor analyzed; the data of interest was the discussion that arose from the card sort activity.

Focus groups employing IPA and card sorting techniques help to mitigate conversation dominance, halo effects (when influential members sway others), and groupthink, the tendency to abandon individual opinions to maintain group cohesion (Love et al., 2020; Nyumbi et al., 2017). Focus group leaders were trained in leading a discussion via card sort, as well as in redirecting conversations when dominance, halo effects, or groupthink were observed.

Data Analysis

In IPA, data analysis is an iterative process. The primary researcher adapted the IPA steps described by Jeong & Othman (2016), including (a) read and re-read transcripts; (b) beginning with one case, make initial codes to systematically capture participant's experiences; (c) develop emerging categories for the case; (d) attend to reflexivity; (e) search for and reduce categories to themes for the case; (f) repeat steps for each case; (g) look for patterns and overarching themes across cases; and (h) again attend to reflexivity. The primary researcher examined the data within and across cases at both the participant and focus group level. This additional level of analysis assured that individual voices, expression, and experience remained paramount.

Analysis Process

As the initial step, all transcripts were read after deidentification. Subsequent rounds of review extracted group dialogue and individuals' voices, using both a priori and open coding.

A Priori Coding. The literature on ERS provided three categories of messages: cultural socialization, preparation for bias, and promotion of mistrust. With these codes in mind, the researcher reread each transcript looking for evidence of and lack of evidence of each category in each participant's responses. This step helped ensure that the idiographic nature of IPA analysis was not lost in the focus group data analysis. From these quotations, agree/disagree charts were created for each group, listing topics around which there was and was not consensus within each focus group. Across the three a priori categories, relevant quotations were used to identify common themes for each focus group to capture convergence and divergence at the group level.

Open Coding. During the subsequent open coding phase, recurring or important topics beyond the three ERS categories were identified within and across groups. Figure 1 provides a visualization of the salience of the ten categories derived from open coding at the focus group

level. Using this visualization tool and the agree/disagree charts for each group, four overarching themes were identified: a sense of being an outsider, navigating discrimination, social/emotional disadvantages, and positive cultural identity (Table 1). Each theme contained two or three of the ten subthemes.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research calls for additional procedures to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the study design and data collection. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four broad categories of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Techniques from each of these were implemented in the current study.

Credibility. This study employed negative case analysis, peer debriefing, and member checking to ensure credibility. During negative case analysis, participants' responses that contradicted other responses were noted in the analysis rather than disregarded. This ensured equal importance to all responses and maintained individual voice. Peer debriefing included conversations with researchers and a Mexican American female collaborator, who evaluated the findings from an outside perspective and provided insight into any biases influencing the analyses. The debriefer reported that the findings seemed both accurate and plausible. e.g., Voermans et al., 2021). None of the participants responded.

Transferability. A transferable qualitative study is analogous to a quantitative study with high external validity, in that the findings are seen as applicable to others outside of the study. This can be accomplished via thick description, meaning the study provides a description of the phenomenon with sufficient and significant detail, as opposed to a surface-level summary. A detailed description allows the readers of the study to explore how the experiences described by participants may apply to other people, contexts, and situations.

Dependability. A dependable study has findings that could be obtained again if the study were repeated. To increase dependability, the current study solicited expert review by a scholar outside the study whose research focuses on improving learning outcomes for marginalized populations including Mexican Americans and Central American immigrant families. The expert reviewer concluded that the transcript data fit the overarching themes.

Confirmability. A confirmable study has findings that are driven purely by the data obtained from the participants, rather than biased by the researcher's hypotheses or expectations. The current study demonstrated confirmability via triangulation and reflexivity. Triangulation involves using multiple sources of data to validate the findings (Guion et al., 2011). Source triangulation occurred as data were obtained from both late adolescents and young adults, gathering information from multiple age groups.

An additional source of confirmability came from reflexive journaling done by the primary researcher throughout the process of data analysis. Reflexivity allowed the researcher to explore how the interactions between the researcher and the participants and data influenced the study. The researchers recorded their impressions and reactions to interactions with participants. For instance, reflexive journal entries suggested that an interviewer's ethnicity as a White/European American may have influenced participants' willingness to share vulnerable experiences. A subsequent word count analysis confirmed that participants shared more information as well as more sensitive information (e.g., documentation status) with the Mexican American group facilitator, indicating a greater level of comfort and trust.

Results

This study examined how ERS was described in reports of high school experiences among Mexican Americans, with the three focus groups with college students reporting

retrospectively. Participants reported that their parents frequently delivered messages of cultural socialization and preparation for bias. Participants tended not to report receiving promotion of mistrust messages, and in the few instances in which they did, they mentioned the problematic consequences of those messages. Thus, the participants' descriptions aligned with two of the three components of ERS described in the prior literature.

Furthermore, our analyses identified four themes that expanded upon the three aspects of ERS: a sense of being an outsider, the experience of navigating inevitable discrimination, social/emotional disadvantages due to cultural values and/or upbringing, and a sense of positive cultural identity inspiring them to disprove stereotypes (Table 1). These themes conveyed key insights about the experiences of these Mexican Americans' experiences in high school that can be used to improve the practice of educators and school counselors and psychologists.

Sense of Being an Outsider

Participants in all groups reported feeling marginalized. Their reports focused on school experiences but included community settings and interactions with other Mexican Americans.

Implicit Marginalization at School

All focus groups discussed feeling unwelcome at school. A current high school student shared: "There's a lot of people who will feel negatively towards us, like our culture in general. And there were times at school, where we just were not welcome." Many participants expressed similar occurrences of ethnic bias or discrimination at school. Even when participants did not report overt bias, they still reported social exclusion, such as another participant who described

her high school experience as, “mostly positive, some negative, and a bit disconnected.”

Difficulty Reconciling Mexican and American Identities

Participants observed that the term Mexican American denotes the coexistence of Mexican and American identities. These were not always easy to reconcile. As one participant put it, “It’s sometimes hard to like embrace, both cultures....you have to be, like, Mexican enough or American enough. ... I really don’t like when people just assume, um, things about me because of how I look.” This journey differed for each Mexican American student, with some participants reporting a sense of isolation even amongst Mexican American peers: “I just wasn’t like other Mexicans, or Mexican Americans. And that was hard to, uh, live with like not being accepted by people of your own ethnicity, who are going through similar things as yourself.”

Difficulty in English-Speaking Organizations/Church Groups

Participants reported feeling like outsiders not only in school but also in English-speaking community and church settings. One participant described the transition from a Spanish-speaking to an English-speaking religious congregation this way:

Growing up, I was in a Spanish [congregation that]... merged with an English [congregation]. And like we had everything separate... we shouldn’t judge each other or assume that someone is the way they are because of how they’re raised or how they look.

The participants spoke about community experiences along with high school experiences since they occurred concurrently, and both involved peers. In other words, the participants’ experiences in school were congruent with their experiences outside of school, with both characterized by an overall sense of exclusion.

Navigating Discrimination

Beyond reports of feeling like outsiders, participants often described instances of overt

discrimination during high school. Participants generally reported being told by their parents that discrimination would be an inevitable part of their lives, which although disheartening, helped some participants feel prepared to handle discrimination when it occurred.

Demeaning Messages in High School

Participants reported hearing messages that they, as Mexican Americans, were less capable or deserving than others: “They’ll say a lot of, like, really racist things... I can hear it everywhere.” These demeaning messages mostly came from White/European American peers but occasionally from teachers and school personnel. Sometimes these messages were subtle but recognizable upon reflection, as one participant indicated: “I feel like I, I didn’t recognize discrimination while in high school, um, just because I grew up around a lot of Mexicans... but now at my age I realize like there was, discrimination, even among, among Mexicans.” Participants expressed that the devaluation of Mexican Americans in high school made the social environment difficult to navigate, especially at such a critical time of identity development.

Told that Discrimination was Inevitable

Across all focus groups, various participants shared a sense of the inevitability of discrimination, whether explicitly or implicitly taught at home. Some participants felt that such preparation for bias messages were helpful in being prepared: “We can’t really prevent it from happening; it’s going to happen regardless because the world’s just the way it is, so I think being prepared for it and also knowing how to react says a lot about yourself.” Another participant said that her mother “told me like everyone faces, things like that [discrimination] no matter where it happens.” A compelling metaphor was shared by another student: “My mom, I remember like she said, ‘If I live in America, I’m going to experience racism. Like that’s just, it is what it is. It’s like the tax I have to pay to achieve the American dream.’”

Within-Group Judgments by Other Mexican Americans

Although discrimination may often be thought of as biased treatment of ingroup members by outgroup members, some participants reported experiencing discrimination from ingroup members, other Mexican Americans. Sometimes it was based on skin color or language abilities: “A lot of it is like...you got to be lighter skin to be beautiful.... Also that in high school those groups were formed based on who spoke English a certain way and who didn’t.” Peer judgments about the students’ perceived cultural status/acceptability could come from both males and females. The sharing of these overt instances of mistreatment from other Mexican Americans elicited particularly strong emotional responses, with one participant’s expressions and tone indicating lingering anger and resentment.

Social/Emotional Disadvantages

The Mexican American participants reported some social/emotional disadvantages resulting from ERS, including mismatches between their own experiences and the advice/warnings given by well-meaning adults and parents. Specifically, adults’ promotion of mistrust sometimes complicated peer relationships and hampered meaningful connection with others. A related concern was that ERS messages were characterized by a lack of parent inquiry about the youth’s perceptions and emotions, which left some participants wishing that parents had more frequently checked on how they were doing, rather than telling them what to do.

Barriers to Positive Relationships with Others

An interview question about barriers in relationships with members of other ethnic groups yielded three types of responses. First, participants described a need to bridge the gap between abstract ERS messages and reality, particularly when they themselves lacked exposure to other ethnic groups: “I knew I was Hispanic, but I didn’t know that there was other types of

Hispanic” and “In elementary school...I was enrolled [with] all Hispanic students, and then when [secondary classes were racially diverse] it was kind of like a shock to me.” Notably, a second barrier arose from the comparative nature of ERS messaging, which tended to foster comparisons among Mexican American peers: “People trying to compare their experiences with each other, like ‘Well, I had it worse,’ or ‘You don’t have it as bad,’ so I feel like that really creates a barrier.” Finally, several shared how ERS messages about other groups “makes it harder for me to trust them.” They recognized this comparative dynamic as stereotyping, “like the way society kind of portrays people.”

Lack of Understanding and “Emotional Game” among Parents

Participants felt that adults and parents often brushed over emotional experiences. One participant shared that she had rarely seen her father cry and infrequently discussed emotions with her mother, which she attributed to cultural values: “I think that’s just how we have it in the Mexican culture is just that we always have to be strong [as] if nothing’s bothering us. So then we can like push forward and keep going through life.” Two participants from another focus group noted that their parents would ask them about grades but not wellbeing. One participant said, “I get it, academics are important, but like parents need to step up their, you know, emotional game. Or be there emotionally. No, no judgment, you know.” Navigating emotions proved challenging when ERS messages omitted emotional considerations or when parents were unavailable, as described by another participant: “When I talked to my parents, mostly my Mom ‘cuz my Dad works tons of hours... she was all like, I don’t know what to tell you.”

Positive Cultural Identity and Socialization

The theme of positively experienced cultural identity emerged across all four focus groups. The participants conveyed appreciation for the benefits of learning about and

participating in family gatherings and cultural activities fostering positive ethnic identity (e.g., traditional meals, music, dress, holidays, and religious observances). Some participants reported that this positive identity fostered a desire to disprove negative social stereotypes, work hard, achieve success in school, and honor the sacrifices made by those who came before them. Only one participant raised concerns about machismo and demeaning treatment of women, and it was unclear why participants did not more often address troubling or complicated cultural dynamics. Their comments emphasized several connecting/beneficial aspects of ERS messages.

Learning About and Participating in Cultural Activities

All participants reported being taught about and/or participating in family and cultural traditions of their Mexican heritage. These conversations and experiences were the primary source of cultural socialization. Participants' recalled cultural traditions and family experiences that were important to them, such as: "When I think of culture, I think of like music and food and traditions....that's kind of like the foundation of just like who you are." In another focus group, one participant highlighted the importance of early cultural learning:

I think it's most important that, like, parents talk more about the traditions and the heritage, so getting the good stuff first before you talk about, like, the bias that you may face and all that. I think it's just important that we just understand that it's not a bad thing that we are Hispanic.

Family socialization helped to foster the development of a strong sense of belonging and connection, with one participant remarking: "It helps you gain self-worth of knowing who you are when you're taught like where you're coming from and about your family."

Desire to "Prove Them Wrong," Disprove Stereotypes

Positive cultural identity also manifested as a desire to disprove commonly held negative

stereotypes about Mexican Americans. One participant poignantly described a shift away from resigned acceptance of negative stereotypes:

I was just one other Mexican that didn't go to class or anything like that, until like I started to like just try harder because of the negative feeling... 'It's like a Mexican who doesn't go to class or anything like that,' [so] I wanted to just like prove them wrong, and, like in a way prove myself wrong. Because it was kind of, it got to the point where I was just like yeah, I am just like the other ones, but then it got to the point where I was like, I wanna be good [and] prove everybody wrong,

This motivation often came from parents, as described by another participant: "When Donald Trump was elected, when I was in, when we were in high school, she [her mother] was like, 'Okay, do whatever you want, prove him wrong' type of thing." Another participated affirmed, "My great ancestors fought for their lives, and I will too."

Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the experiences of current and recent Mexican American high school students and support the assertion that family contexts and parent ERS messaging remain particularly salient when ethnic identity is negatively evaluated or under attack (e.g., Hughes et al., 2006; Huguley et al., 2019). The participants' experiences also indicate that although ERS helps youth be more resilient to overt and covert discrimination, students are not impervious to distress (Saleem & Byrd, 2021). Indifference and intolerance in high school left emotional scars that endured over time.

A key overall finding is that students described their own identity development processes in terms of their relationships, with a focus on exclusion and inclusion. They desired better understanding from and connection with peers and adults. Although ERS messages were

perceived to be generally helpful, adults may not have recognized when the youth would have liked more ongoing, interactive coaching to navigate high school as a member of a minoritized group. Actively fostering peer inclusion, as well as listening for and learning from the experiences of BIPOC students, may enable parents and school professionals to be more helpful than simply providing broad ERS messages (Rivas-Drake & Umaña-Taylor, 2019). The findings of this study indicate that since navigating high school as a Mexican American adolescent is complex (e.g., Livas Stein et al., 2013; Valenzuela, 2010), emotional processing optimally entails interactive conversations (e.g., Kuczynski, 2021).

Ethnic-Racial Socialization Experiences: Four Contributions to the Literature

Participants reported experiences that extended beyond the three broad concepts of cultural socialization, preparation for bias, and promotion of mistrust (Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). Although participants interpreted and utilized ERS messages differently, most emphasized the influence of social experiences more than messaging.

Sense of Being an Outsider

Across our focus groups, the participants felt marginalized at school. School professionals should be aware that Mexican American students may experience a pervasive sense of othering and devaluation even when they do not outwardly exhibit distress. Rather than ignore, normalize, or merely empathize with those experiences, educational professionals optimally explore solutions to promote positive cross-cultural interactions (e.g., Balagna et al., 2013; Saleem & Byrd, 2021).

Atypical of the research literature, yet found in one prior study (Martinez, 2017), participants in our study reported criticism and mistreatment from other Mexican Americans during high school, including colorism, skin-color bias (Hall, 2013). Their descriptions of

rejection or judgment from individuals who the participants had thought would understand and relate with their struggles evoked a special kind of hurt, a betrayal not mentioned in typical ERS messages (e.g., Priest et al., 2014). School-based interventions therefore may benefit from not only promoting intergroup inclusion but also intragroup cohesion, honoring diversity among Latinx students (e.g., Martinez & Nuñez, 2023).

Navigating Discrimination

When participants discussed verbal aggression/insults from White/European American peers, they interpreted those events through the lens that their parents and other adults had shared when preparing them for bias (Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). For instance, they contextualized negative stereotypes in terms of others' lack of appreciation for Mexican American culture.

Although many participants considered such preparation to be necessary, several participants reported a sense of resignation to the inevitability of discriminatory experiences that has not fully been captured in the current research literature. Some felt mixed about preparation for bias messages, which is consistent with the mixed findings in the literature (Davidson, 2017; Liu & Lau, 2013). They expressed a desire for solutions beyond being guarded, advocating for themselves, and educating others. School personnel can therefore inquire about and facilitate practical, specific solutions beyond defensive detachment or pointing out others' biases (Gay, 2018; Stephan & Stephan, 2001).

Social/Emotional Disadvantages

Another theme that emerged from participants was the feeling that the values of their parents' culture/upbringing lacked authentic understanding and "emotional game." An emphasis in Mexican American culture on independence in handling problems influenced the content of ERS messages and emphasized emotional suppression when facing social exclusion and

emotional challenges (Bridges et al., 2012). Especially in the context of pervasive exclusion and occasional overt discrimination, open conversations about wellbeing might have provided much needed support and buffered ongoing feelings of detachment and isolation (e.g., Martinez & Nuñez, 2023).

Notably, participants infrequently mentioned promotion of mistrust messages, and they typically did so in the context of questionable or negative impacts (e.g., Wang, Henry, et al., 2020). Specifically, some mentioned that messages of mistrust created barriers in forming relationships with individuals from other backgrounds, leading to missed opportunities.

Positive Cultural Identity: A Springboard to Disprove Stereotypes

Consistent with the literature on ERS in Mexican American families, the most frequently reported type of ERS was cultural socialization (e.g., Davidson, 2017). These messages were sources of connection and identity affirmation for many participants (e.g., Huguley et al., 2019). Although some participants experienced occasional reservations or shame about their Mexican American identity, having a supportive cultural network yielded multiple positive effects (e.g., Wang, Smith, et al., 2020), primarily initiated by family members.

Some participants took their positive cultural identity one step further, feeling emboldened to push back against and disprove negative stereotypes about Mexican Americans. This desire to replace stereotypes with affirmation is one manifestation of the protective nature of ERS messages (Wang, Henry, et al., 2020), countering ambivalent and demeaning social narratives.

Limitations

In the focus groups participants shared their experiences in ways suggestive of authenticity (e.g., spontaneity, varied emotions, disagreements). Nevertheless, the data had multiple limitations. Other researchers have found that concerns related to U.S. citizenship,

documentation status, and possible deportation impact how Mexican Americans experience and learn about their ethnic identity (Cross et al., 2020). To maintain a sense of participant safety and trust, we intentionally did not address citizenship and documentation status even though the ERS messages were likely influenced by that context.

This study was also limited in its scope due to the geographic location of participants, who were all from the same western state. Furthermore, the participants had attended different high schools with varied demographics. Schools with predominantly White/European American students may have yielded different experiences than schools with large percentages of BIPOC students. The method of convenience sampling also limited the scope of the study, as participants were affiliated with Latinos in Action or Hispanos Unidos and therefore may have shared common characteristics and involvement in activities related to their ethnicity.

The college student participants discussed their experiences retrospectively. Recalling past experiences is a limitation since memories can fade and change as time passes.

Although information collected in focus groups can differ from that obtained in individual interviews, the focus group method allowed participants to orient more towards each other than to facilitator/interviewer. This method seemed to minimize the effects of researcher-participant differences and encourage sharing of personal experiences among the participants. Nevertheless, we found that the responses to the Mexican American interviewer were longer and more detailed than those provided for the White/European American interviewer.

Due to these several limitations, the results of this study are not intended to be generalized. The purpose of this study was to explore the ERS experiences of Mexican American students and lay the groundwork for future research on factors of identity and belonging. The findings may not apply to the experiences of Mexican American students in other settings.

Implications for Research

The reports of students in this study both converged and diverged from descriptions in scholarly literature. The students' experiences can therefore refine theories and inform subsequent observations. As one example, the students' descriptions about how others valued/devalued their Mexican American heritage focused on interpersonal acceptance, which basic concept can sometimes be lost in scholarly abstractions about macrosocial forces.

Thus, a major challenge for future scholarship will be to achieve a better balance between broad research findings (e.g., Smith & Silva, 2011), conceptual models (e.g., Saleem & Byrd, 2021), and the underlying reality of vast differences across individuals. Our interviews made it clear that ERS experiences differ substantially across youth. Family contexts and communities differ, but even more marked are the unique ways in which high school students interpreted and navigated those differences. Some felt resigned to inequities, while others felt better prepared to address social biases. Some expressed resentment toward members of their own ethnicity, while others affirmed the unifying force that other Mexican Americans had provided. Some appreciated adult support, while others deeply yearned for understanding and better modeling. An overarching similarity across all reports was that ERS was described in social terms, but social and associated emotional processes differed across individuals. Although parents and teachers convey ERS messages, the youth received and acted on those messages according to their own experiences, which may or may not have aligned with adult intentions. The complexity of social processes can be better articulated in models of ERS by including reciprocal interactions and by focusing on how youth respond.

A related next step will be to focus research on socialization actions more than spoken messages. Several participants wanted real-world solutions more than adult advice.

Participants' experiences underscored the value of positive cultural socialization, such that a particular focus on those affirming actions and school equity appears warranted (Jensen, 2021). Participants rarely spoke of troubling aspects of their own culture, such as machismo, and they also rarely reported ERS messages promoting mistrust of other racial-ethnic groups. Future research can evaluate circumstances in which mistrust messages may be unhelpful.

Since ERS messages often originate in the home, even school-based research will need to account for family contexts. Huguley and colleagues (2019) specifically recommend situating ERS research in the parenting literature, involving multiple informants, and considering parent-child interactions. School personnel can reinforce ERS messages collaboratively with parents/guardians (Wang, Smith, et al., 2020). Future studies could also evaluate the racial-ethnic climate in participants' schools and communities to determine how those contexts influence ERS and students' experiences with identity development, inclusive of family contexts.

Implications for Schools and Educators

The findings of this study can inform steps to improve the experiences of Mexican American high school students. First and foremost, the participants emphasized the importance of their social experiences in school. Schools can therefore work to alleviate the sense of being an outsider by listening and responding to individual students' racial-ethnic experiences (Rivas-Drake & Umaña-Taylor, 2019). Some participants reported not having a go-to person or school group to turn to when they experienced bias or faced challenges. Students desired meaningful opportunities for interaction, even if those interactions were not specific to Latinx students. School personnel can promote inclusive school policies and facilitate genuine inclusion in existing school programs/activities (e.g., student government, National Honor Society), community organizations, and parent-teacher associations to promote a supportive school culture

(see also Saleem & Byrd, 2021).

Given the participants' concerns about unanticipated judgement from other Mexican Americans, professionals supporting Latinx students can evaluate their schools for instances of ethnicity enforcement and judgmental subgrouping (e.g., ability to speak Spanish/English, neighborhoods, nationality of ancestors). School personnel can become aware of covert hierarchies and exclusionary differentiation (Martinez, 2017) and facilitate cohesion-building activities or student clubs such as Latinos in Action to foster a mutual respect while working toward shared goals (Martinez & Nuñez, 2023).

To better meet student needs, schools can adopt social emotional learning (SEL) curricula. SEL programs can help students be prepared mentally and emotionally as well as intellectually for the range of opportunities and challenges they face (Durlak, 2015). Research has found that at-risk students who feel emotionally supported at school have better academic functioning than those who do not feel supported (Bridges et al., 2012). School professionals can facilitate SEL programs in collaboration with students' families and community organizations sponsoring or supporting such initiatives (Albright & Weissberg, 2010).

Finally, educational professionals can help foster school climates overtly supportive of Latinx students, as well as other BIPOC and historically marginalized students (Smith, 2004). Positive messaging about pluralism that is consistently aligned with fair and equitable school norms, with school administration holding all parties accountable, can support students in their identity development and academic success (Jensen, 2021). Alignment of these initiatives with Latinx populations can be improved by following guidelines for culturally appropriate interventions, in collaboration with community leaders and families (Smith & Trimble, 2016).

In contrast to the typical dynamics of wariness and social exclusion that can result in

disillusionment and resignation to broader societal forces, school norms promoting social interaction emphasize mutual engagement as opportunities for growth. Reinforcing student actions (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002) and conversations (Rivas-Drake & Umaña-Taylor, 2019) creates environments in which motivation and improvement occur across multiple outcomes. Expanding academic supports to include *all* students, regardless of background or ability, can create a microcosm reinforcing desirable outcomes (Jensen, 2021), including long-term outcomes of positive identity development in a multicultural society.

Conclusion

ERS messages informed and sometimes confused Mexican American youth in this study, who had experienced various difficulties in navigating their ethnic identity development. The difficulties stemmed from social exclusion in their school and community (see also Valenzuela, 2010). Dealing with painful emotions in isolation, without peer, parent, or teacher affirmation, appeared to be the most profoundly damaging circumstance relevant to identity development. The participants' narratives reinforced that identity development is fundamentally *social* (Erickson, 1963). Therefore, it may help to improve ERS initiatives by keeping a focus on the interactive/experiential aspects of socialization, partnering with Latinx families and communities. School professionals collaborating with parents can emphasize and promote meaningful sociocultural supports in school settings, such as school-wide social emotional learning curricula and targeted efforts to integrate historically marginalized students (Saleem & Byrd, 2021). Overall, this report conveys an invitation for educational professionals to foster interpersonal connections in schools rather than simply talk about racial-ethnic issues.

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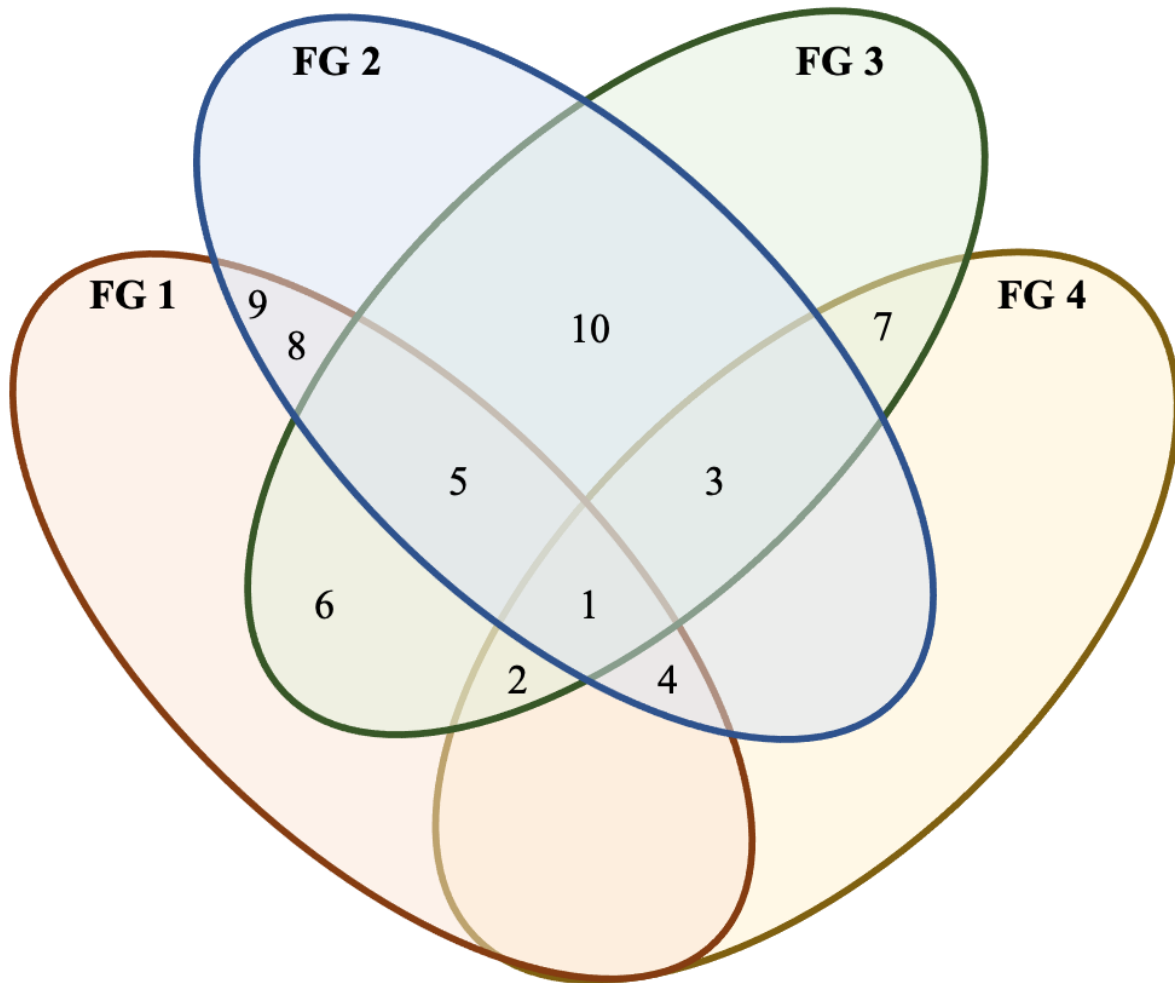
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Table 1

Summary of Focus Groups' Main Themes, Subthemes, and Relevance to Three ERS Types

Overarching Theme	Subtheme Categories (open codes)	Relevance to ERS Types (a priori codes)
Sense of Being an Outsider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implicit marginalization at school - Difficulty reconciling Mexican and American identities - Difficulty in English-speaking communities/churches 	<p><i>Preparation for bias</i> messages had occurred, but students faced prejudice across many settings with various degrees of preparedness. Moreover, they were unprepared for peer mistreatment from their ingroup, other Mexican Americans.</p>
Navigating Discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discrimination often recognized after the event - Told discrimination was inevitable - Within-group discrimination 	<p><i>Preparation for bias</i> messages had occurred, but knowing they would face discrimination did not help them to handle it. So the messaging needs to include coping skills.</p>
Social/emotional Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Barriers to relationships with other racial/ethnic groups - Lack of understanding or compassion from parents/adults 	<p><i>Promotion of mistrust</i> messages made it difficult to form peer connections. <i>Cultural socialization</i> messages were often unidirectional or events, without inquiry.</p>
Positive Cultural Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resilience and belonging from learning about and participating in cultural activities - Desire to disprove negative stereotypes 	<p><i>Cultural socialization</i> messages predominated, with participation in cultural activities fostering ethnic identification and cohesion, sometimes inspiring overt cultural affirmation.</p>

Figure 1*Overlapping Theme Categories Across Four Focus Groups*

Note. FG = Focus group number. The other numbers indicate subthemes, as follows: 1 = Positive cultural socialization; 2 = Implicit marginalization at school; 3 = Difficulty reconciling Mexican and American identities; 4 = Barriers to positive relationships with others; 5 = Told that discrimination was inevitable; 6 = Desire to “prove them wrong,” disprove stereotypes; 7 = Lack of understanding and “emotional game” among parents; 8 = Demeaning messages in high school; 9 = Difficulty in English-speaking community/church; 10 = Within-group judgments by other Mexican Americans

Practitioner Points

Mexican American students reported benefitting from ethnic-racial socialization that emphasized the positive aspects of their culture. They desired solutions for racism, real-world skills for interacting across-cultures, and emotional support. Given the students' focus on social interactions, educators can foster connections rather than simply deliver messages about ethnicity and race.

Appendix

Condensed Focus Group Interview Protocol

1. Before the interview begins, double check recording devices. Have at least two recording devices for each focus group. Do not begin to record unless all consent and assent forms had been completed.
2. As participants enter, have them verify their email and fill out a name tag.
3. Begin with the facilitator providing introductory comments: **Thanks for being here tonight! I'm looking forward to talking with you all. We've met a couple times already, but my name is _____. This is _____. She will be taking notes as we talk and might ask questions sometimes. Her notes won't include your names or identifying information connected to your comments.**
 - a. Ask students to write their email to receive a gift card: **If you haven't already, please make sure that I have your correct email so I can send you the Amazon gift card.**
 - b. Ask participants to review forms and ask any questions. Offer a copy of the assent form for each person to keep. Some will want a copy, others will not, but always offer.
4. Give a brief overview of the project and goals for the focus group: **Just as a reminder, we are talking to you to find out about your experiences as Mexican American students who are currently in or recently graduated from high school. There are no right or wrong answers; we just want to know about your thoughts and experiences.**
5. Give participants information about the process, breaks, and incentives: **We will talk for about 30 minutes. You will then have a break for 15 minutes. After the break we will visit for about 30 more minutes. At the end we will ask that you complete a short information sheet.**
6. Provide basic guidelines for the focus group and review them with participants: **Before we get started, I'm going to go over some guidelines for the group discussion**
 - a. **Everything you say will be kept confidential. The research team will not share any information that will identify you. Transcripts will be de-identified.**
 - b. **Remember to keep personal stories "in the room"; do not share the identity of the other participants or what anybody else said outside of the meeting.**

- c. **If you feel uncomfortable during the meeting, you have the right to leave or to pass on any question.**
 - d. **Resources will be provided after the meeting if you need support.**
 - e. **Does anyone have any questions?**
7. Start with an engaging opening question. This question is intended to help break the ice and should be simple and easy to answer. Your goal here is to put the participants at ease and help warm them up about the topic: **Let's get started! Why did you decide to be part of this focus group?**
8. **Thanks for sharing! The rest of the questions we talk about have little cards that go with them.** (Ask to borrow one participant's cards if necessary). **Some of the cards have possible responses printed on them, while others have space for you to add your opinion, and some are blank for you to add any other thoughts. Each question will have a task related to the cards (e.g., sort from most to least agree). Does that make sense? Feel free to ask questions at any time; the cards can be confusing.**

Focus Group Questions

Read the question, the card sort instructions, and the options. After sufficient time has passed for them to sort, ask: **Who has some thoughts to share about this question?**

1. Here's our first question with the cards. You should have 1A through 1C, plus a "My opinion" card and a blank card. Parents and children often have various types of conversations about ethnicity in the home. What do you think is the best way for a parent to talk about ethnicity with their child?
- Card sort task: Sort the following options from most to least beneficial*
- a. When parents teach me about the traditions and heritage of our culture
 - b. When parents help me understand that I may face bias due to my ethnicity
 - c. When parents encourage me to trust those of our same ethnic group, and distrust those in other groups as well as police officers
 - d. My opinion:
 - e. [blank]
2. This question also has three cards: 2A through 2C. Some people say that learning about the traditions of your culture affects how you feel about your heritage. What would you say to that? What would you change or add to these options?
- Card sort task: Sort from most to least impact on your feelings about your heritage*

- a. Learning about the history of my ethnic group helps me feel proud to belong to it
 - b. Learning about famous people from our ethnic group and the good things they did helps me feel positively about being Mexican American
 - c. Remembering my ethnic heritage is important to me
 - d. My opinion:
 - e. [blank]
3. What do you feel is the parent's role – if anything – in preparing their children for what might happen in school? What would you like your parents to do to prepare you?
- Card sort task: Sort by most to least helpful*
- a. Help me understand what it means to be Mexican American and help me develop a positive sense of who I am
 - b. Warn me about people who might treat me differently because I am Mexican American
 - c. Tell me about who I can and should trust to help me and look out for my best interests
 - d. My opinion:
 - e. [blank]

[Let the participants know when you are going to ask the last question. This cues the participants to share relevant information that may not have come up in answer to your key questions. For example: **We are on the last question. Think about anything else you want to share that we haven't talked about yet.**]

4. Are there any other ideas you have to share? Use these three cards to write down any ideas that you think are most important and ideas we didn't talk about yet.
 - a. Things I did not agree with
 - b. What I think needs to be added
 - c. What I wish people knew

For every question, not solely at the end of the focus group, please ask follow up questions as needed, such as: **I noticed...Can you explain more? Can you give an example? Say more about that? Tell me more. Is there anything else? I'm not sure I understand – say more. Can you be more specific? When you say ____ what do you mean? Help me understand. Can you clarify? Can you please describe what you mean? Could you give me an everyday example?**

At the end, thank everyone for participating and distribute the brief demographic survey. **Thank you all for the contributions you made to our group discussion! I have one last thing for you to fill out before you go, a quick survey.** (Distribute demographic survey). Remind participants about gift cards.